Colin Fletcher, The Complete Walker and other titles

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- Skills and guides - Library -

Description:
The Complete Walker and Colin Fletcher's other nine books are reviewed. The author also weaves in some of his early backpacking experiences.

Publication: Thursday 3 August 2006

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This review will touch on Colin Fletchers works, classics of backpacking how-to and enjoyment. Colin had a profound impact on my early backpacking days and has remained one of my favorite authors. In some respects his work reminds me of Calvin Rutstrum ... a couple of decades more modern, and instrumental in the new age of backpacking, but still having a mixture of how-to with wonderful books of dream trips that utilized his techniques.

It is likely that most readers of this site are well acquainted with Fletcher's *Complete Walker* in at least one of its derivations, but his other less popular works are excellent in their own right and well worth seeking out.

This review will touch on these ten publications:

*The Thousand Mile Summer in Desert and High Sierra*

*The Man Who Walked Through Time*

*The Complete Walker*

*The Winds of Mara*

*The New Complete Walker*

*The Man from the Cave*

*The Complete Walker III*

*Secret Worlds of Colin Fletcher*

*River: One Man's Journey Down the Colorado, Source to Sea*

*The Complete Walker IV with Chip Rawlins*
But first a bit of background.....

In 1969 or 1970 I went on my first backpacking trip. My cousin, one of his friends and his father, and I planned a summer trip to a high mountain lake on the border of Montana and Wyoming. This lake is about 5 miles from the trail head in the Absaroka-Beartooth Mountains of southeastern Montana. I distinctly remember collecting, begging, and borrowing various pieces of equipment for this trip. My Coleman sleeping bag....about the size and weight of a pony keg, my 4-piece combination spinning/fly rod, reels, tackle, 2 and 3 pound coffee cans for cook pots, a fry pan, surplus poncho, probably about a half-mile of cord, food (including real eggs, hamburger, butter and who know what else), plus a few extra clothes and other sundry items were making an impressive pile for this one-week trip. I bought a straight aluminum backpack frame with shelf and a Boy Scout canvas bag and started stuffing in all this duffel. I do not exactly recall how much this pack ended up weighing, but it and this trip were going to teach me many things and ultimately introduce me to Colin Fletcher's books.

A 16-year old kid on his first backpacking trip likely can never turn out badly. We all had a great time. The walk in seemed to take forever with the nylon belts of that packframe cutting deeply into my frame and every lump in the pack trying hard to dig its way into my spine, but the trail followed beautiful high mountain meadows and open timber to finally ended up at Granite Lake. We set up camp in a well-used spot and commenced fly-fishing the icy waters. Without waders it did not take too long to end up with blue legs, but the fishing was good in this stocked lake and breakfasts and dinners were grand affairs of fish, eggs, bacon, potatoes and gravy topped off with cold lake water and coffee. Our surplus ponchos as open shelters let in all the mosquitoes and the lumpy Coleman bag cushioned the ground but could not quite keep out the cold nights.

A week later we walked back out to the trailhead, sunburned but ready for another trip. I remember thinking about the equipment I was hauling and wondering if there was a better way. A trip to my local library started me on another sort of adventure. I found Colin's 1968 edition of *The Complete Walker* which introduced me to an assortment of equipment that is still rather hard to believe was and is available. After reading this manual I also checked out his two earlier works which only stimulated dreams of big trips. Subsequent publications from Fletcher have always made my reading list for his wit, humor and style along with his experience and detail of techniques and equipment.
In the summer of 1958 Colin walked the length of California, from Mexico to the Oregon border. This highly readable text is his trip travelog. His encounters with the people and places of the walk make for fine reading. His walk takes him along the Colorado river, through ghost towns, the Mojave Desert, across the White Mountains, to Tahoe and then north to the Oregon border.

This lesson from his days in the Mojave on photography and time is one I also know well:

But the Mojave chose that day to stage its extravaganza. Scene after provocative scene cajoled, beckoned, tempted, titillated, and generally did its best to seduce the photographer in me......No man with warm photographic blood in his veins could be expected to withstand such well-staged witchery. I was quickly seduced. And the love making proved so diverting that in three hours I covered rather less than three miles.

People who aim no higher than embalmed studies of Aunt Fanny outside the drug store never seem to understand how photography eats up time. If one of them had come with me that morning he might see the glimmering of light. It was not just that exasperation and loving care had to fight their usual battles, first against each other, then as allies against form, balance, shadows, depth of focus, light fluctuations, parallax and a wobbly tripod. I also had to cope with the flimsy temperament of lizards, with the irresistible beckonings of a yet more brilliant display every time I moved forward for a flower shot, and with a fifty-pound pack that had to come off for almost every shot and then back on again. After three hours of it, even a box-camera beginner would have grasped how it can take you three hours to go three miles.
Throughout the text you will find details of Colin's day or techniques that will reappear in his more well-known Complete Walker series of books. Here is a classic reference to what is to come in four years:

*But the pack had long ago become something I felt affection for, something that meant home and comfort. And when, looking ahead, I began to think of my apartment, I found it hard to readjust to the idea that before long home’ would once again be a place of curtains and carpets and a refrigerator instead of five square yards of California over which I happened at each halt to spread the house on my back.* p196

The next few pages after this quote is the genesis for Colin's multi-page *A Sample Day in the Kitchen* which will appear in *The Complete Walker*.

And this quote, from near the end of his walk, sort of sums up this wonderful book:
The Thousand Mile Summer definitely makes my must read list from Colin Fletcher. A travelog can be dreadful reading but Colin makes this one a page-turner that combines both sensitivity to the lands and persons met with enough of the basics of daily operations to interest any long distance walker (or dreamer).


The Man Who Walked Through Time, 1968

In 1963 Colin walked, within the rim, the length of the Grand Canyon National Park. This summer walk followed on the heels of his earlier distance walk and added to his experiences and methods. Airdrops, food caches, and swimming with the pack are new discussed techniques rolled into a wondrous presentation of the canyon environment.

Colin weaves in passages of his days in the canyon that are both illustrative of technique and provide verbal imagery of the canyon. Early in his walk, when the canyon and side-canyons forced a serpentine route he notes:

Every step was zig or zag; zig along a sidecanyon; zig again for a side-sidecanyon; then zag along its far side to resume the fist zig; almost at once, a new zig for a new side-sidecanyon; and then another zig up a side-side-sidecanyon. And the going was almost never level. All day I kept having to cross or to detour laboriously around little tributary gullies that were hardly deeper than suburban living rooms. p 69

Each day, from the moment of my decision to press ahead, I made progress in other things too, apart from space. Most notably, I made progress in my war with trivia.

It is often difficult to remember, when conditions have radically changed, what occupied your thoughts most at a certain time. A notebook is the surest guide. My notebook shows, quite luminously, what important things were in those first days across the Esplanade. It makes sparkling reading: Tea time: wash sox, fill canteens, and Wearing long pants all day, so it must be cold. And Dawn 4:45, ground temp 32deg, sox frozen solid (drying on pack). Frost on sleeping bag, but slept only very slightly cold, naked, No wind, and really very pleasant weather, and next day: Lunch 1:30 Shade temperature 76deg, in sun 102deg. ...

But even in this tight world of trivia, things were getting better. Each day my muscles responded more readily to the pack's dead weight. Chapped thighs and twig-puncture nerve grew less painful. Above all my feet held out---under a growing patchwork of those oddly miraculous adhesive felt pads called Moleskins. The Moleskins marked forty cents, were the most precious commodity in my pack. p 69-70

All through this book, Colin laces his daily experiences with his daily observations of the canyon. This passage, a semi-revelation about the wonders of Non-Photography will appear in The Complete Walker later:
In order to photograph a scene that for interest and balance demanded a figure in the foreground, I had mounted my camera on its lightweight collapsible tripod for a delayed-action self-portrait shot. But as I moved into position a gust of wind sent camera and tripod crashing over. And afterward the shutter refused to function.

I had brought only this camera down into the Canyon, and at first I simmered with frustration. But within an hour I discovered a new fact of life. I recognized, quite clearly, that photography is not really compatible with contemplation. Its details are too insistent. They are always buzzing around your mind and clouding the fine focus of appreciation. You rarely detect this interference at the time, and cannot do much about it even if you do. But the morning of the Serpentine reconnaissance, after the camera had broken, I found myself freed from an impediment that I had not known existed, I had escaped the tyranny of film. Now, when I came to something interesting, I no longer stopped, briefly to photograph and forget; I stood and stared, fixing truer images on the emulsion of memory. p 120

Of course, Colin replaces the camera at the next opportunity but the lesson is a good one anyway for all walking photographers.

The Man Who Walked Through Time is just as compelling a read as The Thousand Mile Summer. Colin's gathering of details, experiences with equipment and techniques will lead directly to his next and what is arguably his most important book, The Complete Walker.


Colin Fletcher's first "Complete Walkers" The Complete Walker and The New Complete Walker

The Complete Walker, 1968

Even though this is Colin's third book, for me it is his most pivotal work. His earlier The Thousand Mile Summer and The Man Who Walked Through Time had much to do with The Complete Walker; many examples and in some cases complete passages are right from these earlier works, but these trips themselves (and likely others) were the
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foundation of his long distance walking and formed the root of his equipment and techniques which are presented in this manual.

I think that Colin's organization of this book contributes greatly to readability. After an Introduction of Why Walk he then establishes the gear discussions with House On Your Back. By relating walking to a traveling house, he has established a perfect metaphor for the structure of this book. House On Your Back is divided into eight chapters, from which I will quote passages.

Ground Plan...an introduction of sorts

I will make no apologies for writing a highly subjective book---a book that will give many experienced walkers a whole slew of satisfying chances to snort with disagreement. For backpacking is a highly subjective business. What matters to me is what suits me; and what matters to you is what suits you. So when I describe what I have found best, try to remember that I am really saying that there are no truly objective criteria, and the important thing in the end is not what I or some other so-called expert happens to use or do, but what you find best......All this means that some of my solemn advice will soon be outmoded. But it does not matter. Although I shall often be describing specific items, the essence will lie not so much in those items themselves as in the governing principles---in the vital factors an intelligent backpacker should keep his eyes skinned for. p14

Foundations...boots, socks, walking staff and other supports

What better place to start with walking than with the feet. This chapter covers boot selection, fitting, care, laces, breaking in etc along with socks and foot preparation and care. (His discussion of Moleskins is not to be missed...these little gems have saved me many a miserable day walking, and because of Colin, I never fail to carry a packet). This early edition of The Complete Walker was written long before light weight hiking shoes/boots were available so this advice will likely be seen as outmoded. However, the absolute gem of this chapter is the walking staff discussion. I have been an advocate of a walking staff for all my walking life. I buy, cut or make them in various places around the globe that I have walked. I absolutely know that my love of a good staff comes from Colin's words in The Complete Walker.

Fletcher Icons Limmer standard boots and my favorite palm walking staff

Although the vast majority of walkers never even think of using a walking staff, I unhesitatingly include it among the
foundations of the house that travels on my back. I take my staff along almost as automatically as I take my pack. For many years now it has been a third leg to me—and much more besides. p37

He goes on to enumerate many examples of a staff’s usefulness including it converts me when I am heavily laden from an insecure biped into a confident triped. It often acts as the indispensable upright needed to rig up a shelter from rain or sun with fly sheet or ground sheet or poncho....and day in and day out, at almost every halt, it props up my pack and gives me a soft and stable backrest.....as I am lazy enough to believe that being able to relax against a soft backrest for even a ten-minute halt is no minor matter, I am almost inclined to regard this function of my staff as one of its most vital. p37-38

**Walking Sticks** Part of my addiction in a handpainted cream can

**Walls**...packs

In this edition, packs refer to exterior aluminum framed packs with full length packsacks. Setting up the pack, particularly the *Office-on-the-Yoke* with some of its pieces of furniture and the use of *The Walls as Non-Walls* are worth reading. *The Walls as Non-Walls* is the full discussion of the use of the pack as backrest propped against his staff. This was a novel idea when I first read this text and one that I practice to some degree...not every rest stop but certainly at long stops or where I can make my pack behave properly as a backrest.

*But for my money by far the most important auxiliary use is...the pack as backrest. If you prop the full pack at an*
angle and lean against it so that your back comes between the side and center pockets, it makes a very comfortable chair back. When the bag has been emptied or part-emptied, prop the frame at right angles to your axis and lean back on it either direct or with the luxury of padding of an air mattress. When you can, simply prop the pack against a tree or a rock. But, if like me, you believe in resting on the smoothest and softest piece of ground in sight, there will nine time out of ten be no such convenience. So mostly you use your staff as the prop. It soon becomes almost automatic, the moment you halt---even for a ten-minute rest---to look for a rock or a crevice or tree or even just a clump of grass to wedge the butt of the staff against. Failing all these---and here again you will fail regularly---just angle-prod the staff down into the soil until it holds firmly, with or without an assist from a stone, and then jam the top of the staff between the yoke and the top crossbar of the pack, hard up against the bag...It sounds rather complicated, I know, but after a while the whole operation takes about four seconds---and virtually no conscious thought. p65

Kitchen...food, water, cooking etc

Not to be missed in this long chapter is A Sample Day in the Kitchen. This 9+ page passage never fails to illuminate Colin's style. I will not quote it all as my fingers would likely fall off, but in this chapter which covers choices of stoves, water carriers, foods, water, fire, and other kitchen utensils this passage essentially integrates these tools into an unmistakable style of operation that is described so well that it almost seems like a movie.

A Sample Day in the Kitchen...(not to mention the bedroom, and most other departments too.) (Meticulously applicable only to those who operate on the Fletcher in-sleeping-bag culinary system.) Something stirs inside you, and you half-open one eye. Stars and blackness, nothing more. You close the eye. But the something keeps on stirring, and after a moment you slide another inch toward consciousness and turn your head to the east and reopen the eye. It is there all right, a pale blue backing to the distant peaks. You sigh, pull up one arm inside the mummy bag, and check that the luminous hands of your watch say five o'clock. p123

You swirl the teapot a couple of times to suffuse the tea, take a few more mouthfuls of fruit-and-cereal, then pour a cupful of tea, squirt-add milk, spoon in copious sugar (the sugar container spent the night beside the pots), and take the first luxurious sip. Warmth flows down you throat, spread outward. Your brain responds. Still sluggishly, it takes another step toward full focus. p125

From awakening, through walking the day and setting up the same Fletcher in-sleeping-bag culinary system for the evening and dinner this passage covers the essentials of his kitchen methods. The milk squirter...a Sue Bee honey container, the Svea stove and it hellishly hot cover that is used as a cup rest, the Wilson meat bar (sadly no longer available) and vegetable stews are all key components of his culinary system. I have never once mimicked this style but I have never once failed to marvel at its simplicity and efficiency.

Bedroom...the roof; tents and non-tents, ground sheets, mattresses and sleeping bags

Again a rather extensive chapter covering various gear choices with his discussion on non-tents probably being well ahead of it time.

Under most conditions, the best roof for your bedroom is the sky. The common-sensible arrangement saves weight, time, energy, and money. It also keeps you in intimate contact with the world you are presumably walking through in order to come into intimate contact with.

Yet in spite of the obvious advantages of rooflessness a majority of indoorsmen---and quite a few outdoorsmen---seem to think that camping means sleeping in a tent. p137, 139-140
What follows is a discussion of various tents and then many forms of non-tents...the tents all likely being outmoded but the non-tents in most cases still good alternatives even nearly 4 decades later. I always appreciated this chapter's discussion of non-tents as my first trip utilized surplus ponchos and plenty of cord to construct our shelter. I have read many forum threads discussing the elusive Visklamp device (a ball and wire loop used to add attachment points to a tarp), and in my recollection no one has ever found these. The (plastic) sheets are quite plain, without grommets or attachments of any kind. You secure them with improbable little two-part devices called Visklamps (3/4 ounce and 10 cents each). p155-156

My other favorite passage from this chapter concerns Getting to Sleep...An experienced outdoorsman has suggested that I include in this chapter the ritual of getting to sleep in a bag, and as he is my editor I suppose I had better attempt the task. My technique is to lie down, close my eyes, and go to sleep. p196

Clothes Closet...clothes rather obviously

Colin is known for walking with only a hat, boots and socks so while this chapter could have been brief it does cover suitable clothing from the age prior to polyester. One of my still all-time-favorites from his clothes closet is his String (or fishnet) vests or shirts. These rather unlikely-looking garments are a lot of big holes tied together with string. At least, the original models were. p199

I have always found string undershirts to be perfect underwear and find their nearly lack of availability in this age of plastic underwear to be a sad state. Only Norwegian Brynje seems to still offer string underwear in a poly material (and I can attest to their superiority to the old cotton versions). They also offer a wool/poly net that looks great but I have not tried.

Colin’s discussion of shorts, hats, down, ponchos and parkas leads into the hiker’s dilemma which he covers in The Wardrobe in Action. Sartorially (or if you prefer it, clothes wise), hikers can be subdivided into two distinct breeds: the put it on and keep it on school and the keep adjusting your clothing all day long so that you’re always comfortable faction.....I find that in any but frigid weather it takes barely a mile of walking and a side glance of sunshine to strip me down to hat, underpants, shorts, socks and boots. That, I find, is the way to walk. With air playing freely over your skin you feel twice as fresh as you did with a shirt on.....It is not often that you meet the right and necessary combination of weather and privacy and so can carry the keep-adjusting-your-clothing-all-day-long-so-that-you’re-always-comfortable system to its logical conclusion. The first time I did so for any length of time was on my long Grand Canyon journey. Of course, I exercised due care for a few days with the previously shielded sectors of my anatomy. In particular, I pressed the bandanna into service as a fig leaf. But soon I was walking almost all day long with nothing above my ankles except a hat. p219-220

Furniture and Appliances...all the other stuff

From cameras to whistles Colin looks at a vast array of stuff that always finds it way into a pack. Most of the items plus a pile more are likely to be part of any walker's assortment. Flashlights, binoculars, maps, compasses, first aid kits, matchcases, mirrors, notebooks and pens, watches, repair kits, cord, fishing gea, film cans, plastic bags and a host of other pieces of furniture are discussed in this chapter. One of Colin’s toys that once again I have added to my gear pile (like a staff) is a thermometer. I still have my old brass-cased Taylor mercury thermometer for all the same reasons as Colin. It is five years now since I began taking a thermometer on walks, and I still have no reasoned explanation of why it makes such a beguiling toy. I have to admit, I suppose, that it is primarily a toy. It has taught me a number of interesting facts: the remarkably tenuous relationship that exists between air temperature and what the human body feels; the astonishingly hot surfaces that your boots often have to walk on and can sometimes avoid; and the actual temperature of a river I had to swim in (the body is a miserable judge here too, and the temperature can be critical if you have to swim far). But the sort of information my thermometer has given me has more often
been interesting than practical.  p259

Housekeeping and Other Matters...organization and techniques

This chapter starts with organization of the pack and covers a host of techniques like river crossings, air drops, sanitation, and real and imagined dangers. Here he presents things that have worked for him like full-framed sized packsacks instead of compartmentalized or ¾ versions, crossing the Colorado on an air mattress and signaling for air dropped supplies. Much of this makes for good reading and you can obviously see that the details come from his earlier long walks. Probably one of the best bits from this chapter concerns Survival...A book like this should obviously have something to say about Survival....But I find to my surprise that I can rake up precious little---and that I've never really given the matter the thought it seems to deserve. Hoping to fill this awkward and humiliating gap in my knowledge, I asked a friend of mine---an experienced hiker, a cross-country skier of repute, and an expert climber who has been on Alaskan and Himalayan expeditions---for suggestions about books to read. Oh, I dunno, he said. I have never read them. And I guess I never give the matter much thought.

Somewhat relieved but still uneasy, I turned for counsel to a practical outdoorsman who is in heavy demand as an instructor of survival and associated crafts. We talked for some time, but with each subject he brought up---water sources, signal flares, first-aid and snakebite kits, loosening waistbelt when wading rivers, and so on---I found myself saying, Oh, but I've discussed that in the book as part of normal operating procedure.

After four or five such answers my counselor paused. Yes, he said slowly. Come to think of it, I guess you could say, really, that if you know how to operate properly in wilderness, then you know most of what there is to know about survival.  p331

Colin finishes The Complete Walker with a plea to learn of the Green World and a comprehensive set of appendices including a gear checklist. This book, along with its three major revisions, from the basis of Colin Fletcher's how-to manuals, and are, in my view, one of the best introductions to backpacking technique and equipment ever published.

The Complete Walker, Colin Fletcher, 1968, Alfred A Knopf, New York. Illustrated (superbly) by Vanna Franks. The first of a series of 4 revised editions that in my view is still worth purchasing for no other reasons than the prices quoted are amazingly low, and that some of the pieces of gear are nearly historical.
The Winds of Mara, 1973

This book is quite a departure from the usual backpacking manuals or essays. Here Colin returns to Kenya after the country has gained its freedom from Britain to spend some time in the Mara...the Northern extension of the Serengeti. Colin in his earlier life had farmed in Kenya after WWII and this return journey is his personal view of the changes to Africa that freedom brought....the good and the bad to this fantastic wildlife sanctuary of the Rift Valley.

In 1991 and again in 1997 I was fortunate enough to spend some time in Kenya and a few days in the magnificence of the Mara. This book was the outcome of an attempt to showcase Kenya's wildlife preserve, but the sadness of corruption and massive bureaucracy that was the norm in post British rule days seeps throughout this text.

Here a waking passage of his first morning (after sleeping in his car) just outside the park:

I lifted my head. A film of moisture coated the inside of the car window. I rubbed a hole in it. The grass stretched pale and dead, almost gray. Above it, gray clouds drifted slowly westward. Two or three miles away, their keels scraped a line of low hills.

I lay back again on my air mattress, conscience at rest. I dozed. But before long---ten minutes later, perhaps, or an hour---I gave up trying to deny that the hole in the window had begun to grow uncomfortably bright. I sat up and opened the car door. And at once the achiever in me was angry at my criminal laziness.

Only scattered clouds remained, scudding after the broken fleet. Eastward, nothing but flotsam fragments cruised the shining blue sky. And all around me the grass was glowing its morning gold. Scents and birdsong interwove.

I got out of the car and put water on the stove. p43

Here a typical lyrical description of one of the Mara residents:

The ant bear or aardvark is an elongated but solidly built pig-like creature that may measure six feet from the tip of its long, tapering snout to the tip of its long, tapering tail. It subsists mainly on termites, with occasional side dishes of ants and wild cucumbers. Its powerful curved claws enable it to dig rapidly into the base of the termite nest. It may excavate a tunnel several feet long and wide enough to accommodate its whole body, and as it digs it keeps on moving down the tunnel. When it strikes termites it thrusts its snout forward and shoots out a thin, sticky tongue, a foot and a half long. The tongue darts and flickers through caverns and galleries, collecting termites enmass, the way Billy Graham collects converts. p 254

The Winds of Mara is a wonderful mix of a naturalists observations, combined with Colin's unique camping stylistic passages all wrapped together with a healthy dose of observations of the humans in charge of the Mara.


The New Complete Walker, 1974
Having extensively quoted from the original edition of *The Complete Walker* I will forgo more quotes from the body of the text and simply capture a bit from the opening passages. I will do this for all subsequent editions of this book also.

This revised edition appears because five more years of backpacking revolution has rolled over us.

Equipment has improved—often radically, sometimes to the point of overengineering. Its manufacturers and distributors have multiplied, specialized, diversified, conglomerated, grown fat. In the kitchen freeze-dried foods have come into their own and the organic movement has unfurled it puritan standards; indeed, the whole lightweight food scene is today a cornucopia that even spills out into the supermarkets. At the receiving end, our numbers have exploded. So has our literature. And we now suffer those slightly unfortunate battle cries, Ecology! and The new ethic! p xiii

Then there is feedback from the first edition. That edition brought me not only a splurge of unexpected affluence and offers from manufactures to try out their wares but also readers’ letters that ranged from joyous through serious, solemn and delightfully nutty to nutty. Most manufactures were extremely helpful. But one of them, in response to a mildly critical report on his equipment, taught me a cautionary lesson in human nature by whipping back a gem of a reply that after four pages of mounting calumny rose to the peroration: Your distortions, misuse, and lies are totally wasted, except to reveal to me the character of you, which I must say comes out quite disgusting. Readers proved gentler and more usefully informative, and I have fed back into this edition a number of their suggestions. p xiii-xiv

I found the various pieces gleaned from his readers woven into this and subsequent revised editions to be just one more reason to read this text. The overall structure of this edition is identical to the original but the additions, the new discussions, the new equipment and the new examples all contributed to an excellent rewrite.


**The Man from the Cave**, 1981

This is probably the most odd of Colin's work. It is more like a detective mystery than anything else. Colin found a cave Southeast of Las Vegas on one of his walks in 1968. There was evidence that someone had lived there in the past. He attempts to find out who this person was decades later. The chain of events and obsessive attempts to solve this mystery is the subject of this text. Colin spent a couple of decades tracing the resident of the cave and lays out a good case for his assertions that Chuckawalla Bill was the cave dweller. This one is not a wealth of backpacking detail or stories but the bits and pieces of Colin's search and his time spent living in the cave adds a bit of richness to what otherwise could have been a pretty dry investigation.

Here is the beginning after Colin stumbles across some of the caves artifacts:

The relics lay on and among a jumble of cut firewood. I knelt down. The firewood half hid many smaller items. There was a lot more stuff than I had thought—enough to tell me something about the man who had once lived in the cave. If I spent an hour or two sifting through his effects...

I straightened my back. Outside, the rock world had grown gray. Within an hour it would be too dark for safe walking. I glanced at my pack, propped up against my walking staff: barely a gallon of water left in my canteens; and
even if I left at once I could not be sure of reaching either the river or a spring before next afternoon.

There was only one thing to do. I went back down into the wash, marked the cave’s location on my map, swung my pack onto my back and walked up the canyon.

A year later I returned.

Now I do not want you to think of me as having spent that year dreaming about the old-timer’s cave. It was not like that at all. I had a busy year and rarely thought of the cave. But it still intrigued me, and I soon decided that the next time I needed to smooth out the creases—alone, away from man-world—I would go back. p6-7


Colin Fletcher, The Complete Walker and other titles

Colin Fletcher’s last two ”Complete Walkers” The Complete Walker III and The New Complete Walker IV

**The Complete Walker III, 1984**

This *Walker* likely is my favorite of the four editions. Colin discovers internal framed packs in this edition and of course, so much more had changed from 1974 that this one really was huge rewrite trying to encompass a real revolution in equipment design. This, as we shall see in *Complete Walker IV*, is the last where Colin has the ultimate say in the text as soul author too. This book is more like my current style of walking than the more modern version below...another reason to like it I suppose.

The second edition of this book appeared because the first was five years out of date. This revision is therefore doubly due: ten more years of backpacking revolution has rolled over us.

Above all hi-tech has hit. Pile, polypropylene and Gore-Tex have transformed the clothes closet. Boots have begun
to break old bonds, packs to mutate and tents to take off. Meanwhile we face packfuls of better traditional mousetraps. And the market place has modulated accordingly. pxi

Only a book geek would find comparison of paragraphs and chapters between the four editions of The Complete Walker a satisfying endeavor...well I find this a satisfying endeavor. Equipment evolution and Colin's evolution are all found in the pages of these four books. Page-by-page, or chapter-by-chapter reading all four books at once the magnitude of the changes a few decades has wrought is abundantly clear. Comparison of these first three, where the only voice is Colin's is a fun exercise.


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Secret Worlds of Colin Fletcher, 1989

This book is unique; it is a collection of eight essays rather than a book of a single topic like all other of his works. This book in some ways gives a bit more personal glimpse into Colin's philosophy and beliefs. His reflections on private places in the forest almost seems like the reader is delving into a personal journal at times. In the first chapter Into the Forest Colin is approaching an, as yet unfinished, trail shortcut that he had been working on.

Before long I discovered that my embryo detour had created a safe and secret little world, a sort of sanctum sanctorum within the forest.

Even on the main trail there is little risk of meeting anyone. I discovered, though, that when I paused or rested or lunched or even camped at any point along the cut-off I knew, about as near as you can know, that I would not be disturbed. Now at last, the work on the cut-off trail was almost complete; but as I stepped over the fallen log I knew I would be tempted to leave it in place, camouflaging the turnoff, preserving my sanctuary. p9

Ten years after The Man Who Walked Through Time trip the walk told in Along the Colorado took place (1973).
Colin begins a walk at his terminus of the walk a decade earlier with the ultimate goal of walking the complete distance of the Colorado in short segments over time. His reflections on the river changes due to man are presented in this quote. His prose is, while more descriptive than Edward Abbey's similar sentiments about the Colorado dams as giant silt traps, is none the less equally profound.

I hoped I would be traveling for several days through such unspoiled desert. But after a few miles---around about the place the map suggested that I had reached the end of the Indian reservation---the riverine softness ended. Another levee began.

Behind it, man has so far touched the land only intermittently. At times I walked through stretches of uncankered landscape. But the desert, as I have said, is simple and frank and vulnerable, and even when man touches it lightly, with no intent of improving that particular place, he soils, corrupts, and sometimes crucifies. Wheel marks persist for years, bulldozer tracks for decades, a narrow dirt road for centuries. And much of the country that lay between the slough and a dam twenty-odd miles upriver has been unsightlied by creeping roads and power poles and a scattering of cranky buildings.

On the third morning, soon after passing through a gate in a fence that was adorned with an odd pair of signs---one proclaiming the start of a national recreation area, the other warning U.S. Property, No Trespassing---I came to the dam.

The dam itself stood stark and stern, all concrete and metal and straight-line engineering. It has a certain cold beauty as it sat there, blocking the river, but it was the beauty of Wall Street on Sunday, when you walk among its huge deserted cathedrals to Mammon.

Above the dam, of course, the river ceased to be a river.

A natural river melds with the land it flows through. That is hardly surprising. The river has created the land. So its margins fit. Earth and water mate, merge, coalesce. Everything connects. All is harmony.

A man-made lake, such as builds behind a dam, lies awkward on the land. Except at highest water, its shoreline is scar tissue: a rim of dead and naked soil that the water's fluctuations have sterilized against both aquatic and terrestrial plant life. A discerning eye will also see that this ugly margin fights the land's natural contours. Earth and water now challenge, clash, grapple. Nothing fits. Nothing connects. All is discord. Along the Colorado p 60-61


River: One Man's Journey Down the Colorado, Source to Sea, 1997

The Colorado River seems to have held Colin's fascination since his early walks along it. River approaches the Colorado from a different perspective, that of a rubber-boat rafter. Colin embarks on a source (Wyoming's Green River) to the sea (Mexico's Gulf of California) journey, a 1700 mile float in this book.

Starting out on foot in Wyoming's Wind River range Colin begins walking the first 20 miles of this trip following the
watershed that forms the Green River. From mile 20 to the sea he will float this river in a raft. In the typical Colin style his commentary on the scenic beauty, the man-made impacts and obstructions, and various encounters with others makes for excellent reading. Colin presents each segment of the trip in chapters with mileage notations and maps and dates as the opener.

Here an example that old dogs can learn new tricks, about 10 rapids down from Flaming Gorge Dam:

River guides are softcover books, printed on waterproof or water-resistant paper, that map a river’s every twist and turn. They show mileages from some specific point, and just enough contours on both banks to help you identify your position. Photographs and quotes in the margins may add historical information. As you float down you keep turning pages, and the map-river flows on.

As a backpacker, I had long loathed trail guides. Loathed them strong and sour, from the pit of my gut. They tend to lead you by the nose, impose tunnel vision, predigest what should be fresh discoveries. To constrain, that is, the freedoms you are walking to find. But backpacking is not river running. I guess I’d glimpsed the differences between them---of nature, not merit---back in the planning stages, because I let experts coerce me into buying guides for the whitewater canyons. And now after only one day’s use, I was already halfway a believer. p115

This book once again shows the depth of Colin as a storyteller. This is not a dry travelog or diary of a float trip but a rich and detailed expression of his love for this river.

River: One Man’s Journey Down the Colorado, Source to Sea, Colin Fletcher 1997, Alfred A Knopf, New York. This edition is richly illustrated with photographs taken by Colin and with chapter opening maps by David Lindroth Inc.

Colin Fletcher’s complete “Complete Walker” series

**The Complete Walker IV, 2002**

Well this fourth edition is the final chapter to date. Now going on 4 years it too is dated in many of the items but again not in the overall philosophy of walking. Adding Chip Rawlins to the authorship has extended the torch. They together use a back-and-forth method to lay out each of their respective ideas, techniques, and equipment items. This actually works quite effectively and opens the book up to more than one opinion. Chip's contributions are heavy in all aspects of new gear, Colin reworks some of the classic passages of style...together this is an excellent collaboration.

Over the years I have compared passages and chapters in the revisions of The Complete Walker and find this now even more fun. Looking and comparing gear from the late 60's to the present really demonstrates the huge changes
that took place (and are continuing to take place). Plastic clothes, a revival of wool (my favorite innovation), wrist and navigation electronics, light light light emphasis in all sorts of gear from tents to titanium has greatly changed the face of backpacking.

_This fourth edition arrives seriously late_: Walker III appeared in 1984, and most of its gear gospel, even much practice gospel, in now old testament. You can blame the updatage delay on my stalwart powers of procrastination, but at least here we go again. With a difference.

This time, two of us are at it.

I'm pushing 80, don't expect to live much beyond 120, and am already backpacking far less ambitiously. So I'm no longer in intimate tough with the most current gear. Obvious solution: co-opt a partner. The trick: find the right one. Perfection, it seemed to me, would be a longtime backpacker, a generation or two younger than me, conversant with gear but no mere gearhead; a proven writer, in tune with the book.

Chip Rawlins---who helped me with snowpack forecasts for my last book River, and whom I'd met briefly in Wyoming---belongs, in his own words, to the generation inspired by the first edition of this book. With frame-pack squeaking and agave staff in hand, I set out in the late 1960s to explore, and have made a life of it. pix

This text covers plenty of these changes but probably the saddest change is in the business of backpacking or adventuring. Many front-line companies from the past are now making woefully inadequate items with only the appearance of quality or usefulness. Chip and Colin note these unfortunate changes in this passage:

CHIP---When I was inspired by the first edition of this book to take up a staff and stride forth, most equipment was made and sold by backpackers with a knack for design who learned the business as a necessity. Some owned shops, like the original Ski Hut in Berkley, or were mountain guides. By the third edition that was not necessarily so. Success had forced many into roles as manufactures and executives. Some like Patrick Smith, founder and grand pooh-bah designer who parted from Mountainsmith, still spend much of their time outdoors. But the companies have passed into other hands. For instance, Mountainsmith now belongs to Western Growth, a venture-capital firm. Likewise, the present outdoor industry employs ranks of perfectly decent yet thoroughly un-outdoorsy folk. Thus at trade shows one hears more of high-touch shoppers, specialty doors, and big-box shifts than of wild weather and narrow escapes.

COLIN---On a purely intellectual level, of course, results have often been beneficial. Fierce competition had generated more varied products of keener design at a larger number of sources. Technological and workmanship standards, have by and large, risen to new high levels. The pressure is so great that virtually every product niche has been filled and you're pretty sure to be able to find something appropriate to your particular needs.

CHIP---If commuters choose to look like Everest climbers, at considerable expense, neither Colin or I dare say them nay. But here's the rub: The entry of the Fashion Monsters into the field might skim the cream from the market, the cream being those who dash out to buy high-end products at full retail price. And this skimming makes it harder for the companies that make real gear to survive. p19-21

This long discussion of the current state of affairs in the backpacking supply business is well worth reading and thinking about. Chip's contributions rolled together with Colin's original work really are a near-perfect combination. Their observations and discussions together are more than the sum of each part, this book has a synergy of energy that I found refreshing in comparison to what I was expecting from a fourth edition of this text.
Colin Fletcher, The Complete Walker and other titles

This edition of *The Complete Walker* is essential reading. Having the others for comparison and historical review is great fun, but this one and likely any subsequent versions need a space on any serious walker's bookshelf.

*The Complete Walker IV*, Colin Fletcher and Chip Rawlins 2002, Alfred A Knopf, New York. Illustrated once again by Vanna Prince (nee Franks), who died just prior to publication and by Hannah Hinchman who took over for Prince providing both new and reworked sketches. Once again with a cover photograph of equipment and abundant appendices.

Overview

Of these works by Colin Fletcher I consider *The Complete Walker* in any or all of its editions as must-reads and likely must-owns for any avid walker. His first two works *The Thousand Mile Summer* and *The Man Who Walked Through Time* are also essential reads. *The Secret Worlds of Colin Fletcher* is also one I consider a must-read for its insights into his thoughts and his creation of many vignettes into his world. *The Winds of Mara* is a wonderful read for anyone contemplating time in Kenya. *The State* politics were firmly in place in Kenya during my visits nearly 20 years after Colin's, but the beauty of the Mara was as encompassing as his observations. *River* and *The Man from The Cave* are great stories but do not absolutely make my must-read list. I am glad to have read them but it is unlikely that I will reread them.

Lake Fork Trail Montana Day Photo Walk 2003

Resources

*A few of my favorite pieces of gear and books*

**Real fishnet or string underwear from Brynje** of Norway. US supplier is **Reliable Racing Supply** for a few of their items. This is about the only poly underwear I will wear anymore. A backward roll of the clock for me to either string underwear or very light weight wool is my revolution in the clothes closet.

**My favorite pure wool underwear is made by Icebreaker.** I buy locally at Pro Mountain which has an informative site....this is a true mountain shop not a poser shop. They carry an everchanging list of excellent gear.

**SmartWool** also makes excellent underwear. I really like their lightest and medium versions which are a tad softer than Icebreaker in my view.
My favorite wool wash is from Danish Woolen Delight. This LANACare Lanolin Soap seems to be somehow tuned to new Mother’s and nursing pads (whatever those may be), but the high lanolin content wash product is ideal for care of Icebreaker and SmartWool underwear. One of the great things about light wool underwear is that it does not develop the stench associated with high-tech plastic underwear. It not only handles moisture in a vastly superior manner, but it can be worn for days without killing off your tentmates and all wildlife in a one-mile radius. I generally soak my wool underwear in a mild soap (Woolite) for a few minutes, rinse well, then soak in a mild solution of this LANACare for several minutes. Drain, squeeze out most of the water and then lay on a rack to dry. I do not rinse this product out. A bottle goes a long way.


Post-scriptum:
Version 1.0 07/18/2006  Inception
Version 1.5 07/24/2006  Images
Version 2.0 08/02/2006  Fini